

Shakespeare's plays 400 years on have messages for us

400 years ago the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays was published. The well off could buy a copy of this most important and impressive volume for £1 from a bookshop in St Paul's Churchyard.

The First Folio published versions of 18 plays that had been published individually, and another 18 that had never been published. Two of his actor friends put this together, with patrons and the assistance of those who owned the copyrights. It is one of the great works of publishing, ranking alongside the bible in English for the influence it had on our language and history. In more modern editions it has become a worldwide fount of great stories, memorable characters and superb writing. So many of our common phrases can be traced back to Shakespeare's lines.

Shakespeare's work has been important in my life. One of the best things in my education was the first year of my English A level studies. We were told to read widely for that year, leaving the set texts for the second. We had to write an essay every week on a different Shakespeare play for a period. It was a revelation. The plays showed what literary genius could achieve as I struggled to improve my writing style. If you want to write well, read well.

I have been to see many productions of plays from his repertoire. Some have impressed and some have undermined the brilliance of the writing with crude impositions by the Director. One of the most extraordinary was a production of Henry VIII in the Church at Stratford. They acted in the spaces between the pews promenade style. The costumes were lifelike based on famous portraits of the characters. You felt you were so close to one of England's most fearsome Kings and his courtiers. Theatre can bring the past to life.

Shakespeare has a lot to say about the gaining and exercising of political power. The power crazed Macbeth murders his way to the crown egged on by his demonic wife. We are asked if the devil can speak true and reminded that false face must hide what false heart doth know. The fool in Lear is full of good advice. You should let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill lest it break your neck by continuing to follow it. Many MPs move away from powerful figures when they are on the downward slope. He tells Lear he should not have been old until he was wise, surveying the damage that the succession to his throne has brought on Lear himself.

Most cutting of all was John of Gaunt's criticism of Richard II. "That England that was wont to conquer others, hath made a shameful conquest of itself". How many Brexiteers with no wish to conquer others felt the second half of that shaft, that the UK had surrendered powers foolishly. Giving away his kingdom to daughters who were meant to be allies proved disastrous for Lear.

The history plays are so well written that they have had considerable

influence on how history sees the late medieval civil wars and the personalities of the Kings and their main rivals. What shines through it for me is the hero, England. "This scepter'd isle...this other Eden..this fortress made by Nature for herself...This happy breed of men.. This earth, this realm, this England". Whatever bad, weak and ill advised Kings might do to their country its underlying strengths, its rich landscape and farms, its freedom loving people, its sense of right somehow survive and carry it through to a better future.

Some of that future arrived in Shakespeare's day as London thrived and expanded and as English culture lived through a golden era of plays, poems, music and paintings. The way Henry V cast off the wayward pursuits of his youth gives us a shining example of great kingship, improved by having the common touch from his tavern experiences. The Merry Wives of Windsor is a wonderful romp which shows how the middle classes could puncture the unacceptable demands of a knight of the realm claiming to be close to the court , trying to exploit his status.

I will leave the last words to Puck who delighted audiences of Midsummer Night's Dream. Shakespeare's vision of a fairy that could travel round the world in 40 minutes was an exciting fancy. The fastest they could do their early circumnavigations was the pace of a sailing boat, remarkable though those new achievements were in a shrinking world. Puck had in mind the people as well as the politicians when he famously quipped "Lord what fools these mortals be." We need to prove him wrong.